

Sellers find it pays to make a home stand out to buyers

By **MICHAEL T. BURKHART**
Courier-Post Staff

Walking through the front door of the bungalow for sale at 1825 W. High St. in Haddon Heights, a potential buyer is drawn through the living and dining room to the back of the house.

Darla DeMorrow wanted to change that, drawing attention instead to the gas fireplace in the living room.

She did it by adding some chairs and a rug to the empty room, opening

the blinds to let light pour in and placing a painting and plant on the mantle to draw attention. And she did it with furniture the homeowner already had, taking things out of storage and putting them back into the house.

"I want it to look like the perfect family could live here," said DeMorrow. "The fireplace is the gem in the room. But it's not the first thing you see unless something leads you to it."

DeMorrow, owner of HeartWork Organizing in Wenonah, is part of a growing trend. She specializes in real

estate staging. With lots of homes on the market, sellers need to make their place stand out.

Sales of previously owned homes are at a 2½-year low, according to the National Association of Realtors. And prospective buyers are cautious as mortgage rates have risen.

Home staging started several years ago on the West Coast and migrated east, said DeMorrow. It also picked up steam with the advent of numerous television shows on networks such as HGTV and The Learning Channel.

WEB EXTRA

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"Most people are looking for a house where they feel they can move in on a Friday and be back to work on Monday," she said. "You have to create the home the buyer wants."

The key is to highlight attractive parts and make a memorable impression, for instance, with a comfy front

porch, intimate breakfast nook or a big bay window with stunning view. In the case of the Haddon Heights home, it was the gas fireplace.

"The idea is to take what's already there and create appeal and romance for little money," DeMorrow explains.

The three-bedroom Haddon Heights bungalow, listed at \$260,000, has been on the market for a few months, said Byron Murrill, a Long & Foster agent in Haddonfield who list-

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HOME & GARDEN

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Trend/Stage your home for sale to make it stand out from the crowd

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ed the house. But with nearly 10 other homes with identical floor plans for sale in the area, something must attract a buyer to this one. Murrill sees staging as another marketing tool.

Outside, the lawn needed to be mowed, a low-hanging branch removed and the ivy trimmed. Within a week, those tasks had been addressed.

Inside, DeMorrow concentrated on three areas — the living room, dining room and upstairs master suite. She showcased nooks in the home, creating small scenes where buyers can envision their own items.

Clutter was not a problem in the empty Haddon Heights home, but that's usually not the case. Kathy Geller, who along with Jennifer Baxter owns Rooms In Bloom, a Moorestown business that specializes in one-day redesigns and real estate staging, said cleaning clutter is

the best thing the seller can do to make the home more attractive.

The home also should be depersonalized. Hide that 60-inch plasma television or knickknack collection.

"Some people just can't get past the clutter," said Baxter, adding that much of staging is psychological. "It's something that keeps the buyer from seeing the potential."

Different levels of staging can be done according to budget, says Geller. A detailed list of suggestions from Rooms In Bloom can run a few hundred dollars, depending on the size of the house.

"You need to do something to make your house stand out in the crowd," Geller advised. "You need to make it memorable. But it has to appeal to a universal buyer."

Baxter and Geller recently spent a day staging a five-bedroom Moorestown colonial at 743 Lippincott Ave., priced at \$1.2 million. Referred to the sell-

er by Edgar & Son, the real estate agent, they highlighted the foyer, windows in the sitting room and fireplace and view in the family room.

Back in Haddon Heights, DeMorrow completes an objective report on the High Street bungalow, rating odor, space, cleanliness, appeal and romance. She then comes up with a list of objectives. Sellers can act on these on their own, but often they hire DeMorrow to take it to the next level.

Often, contractors are hired to paint, improve landscaping or fix broken windows.

"She made it look homey," recalled Altamuro, a real estate agent from Madison, Morris County.

Robert Latigona, of Long & Foster Real Estate in Cherry Hill, is a little skeptical of the staging craze. He believes if someone likes a house, they'll buy it with white walls and without furniture in exactly the right place.

Typically, the mortgage payment, insurance and utilities cost at least that much a month. And in the case of investment properties, owners don't want them sitting empty.

"You're eating away at your profit," she added. "Staging absolutely pays off."

Christine Altamuro and her husband hired DeMorrow to stage an investment property in Mount Laurel. The townhouse, with all new appliances and fixtures, had been on the market for about 1½ months. It sold in four days after DeMorrow was finished with it.

"It's a funny thing," he said. "I've seen perfect houses sit and dog houses sell. It's all timing."

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ON THE WEB

■ www.latigona.com — Robert Latigona is a real estate agent for Long & Foster in Cherry Hill. The site also has information about buying and selling properties.

■ www.hgtv.com — For tips about staging and selling a home, visit HGTV's site.

■ www.roomsinbloom.biz — Visit Rooms In Bloom, which does staging and interior decorating.

■ www.heartworkorg.com — For more information about Darla DeMorrow and HeartWork Organizing, visit this site.

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He also advises clients to put away the clutter and change some paint colors or wallpaper. Like the designers, he believes first impressions are important. Some potential buyers pull up to a house and won't even get out of the car.

"Most people know when they first walk in whether they like the house or not," he said. "Curb appeal is huge."

Clutter can be stashed in a storage unit or sold at a garage sale, said Latigona, who has been in the real estate business for more than 20 years.

"If you walk into a house with clutter, you'll feel there's not enough space in the house. But you want to have that lived-in feel."

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Don't forget your home's curb appeal

First impressions are very important, especially when it comes to selling a house

That includes making sure the lawn is cut and colorful flowers are planted, said Darla DeMorrow, the owner of HeartWork Organizing in Wenonah.

Updated paint on the shutters and porch also helps increase curb appeal.

Many potential buyers do a drive-by of a home before making an appointment with the real

estate agent, said Kathy Geller and Jennifer Baxter, who own Rooms In Bloom of Moorestown.

"It's like a first date," said Geller. "You want to look your best."

Things like taking care of overgrown shrubs, touching up the front door or door frame and sweeping cobwebs from the corners go a long way.

"Everything should be cleaned up as much as possible," said Baxter.

—Michael T. Burkhardt

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